

CROWD: Supercenter holds grand opening

(From 1A)

been down every aisle yet."

And big it is.

The supercenter, located at 4517 N. Midland Drive, is 204,482 square feet — 118,000 square feet larger than the original Wal-Mart — and employs 550 people — 240 additional employees.

"Next time I come I'm bringing a compass," Midlander Ed Rowland said joking.

Waverly allowed that while it was "taking forever to check out the whole store," he and his two children idled at least 15 minutes at the live lobster tank in the seafood section.

Midlander Edna Vaughn said she was "thrilled to pieces" to have the supercenter in Midland.

"People who have lived in Midland a long time appreciate the new businesses. I haven't seen so many people milling about since Outback Steakhouse opened a few weeks ago," she said, noting that there still was a crowd waiting to get into the restaurant Friday night.

Wal-Mart took on a festive air Friday evening as children wore helium-filled balloons tied to their wrists and people greeted each other as they leisurely perused the store.

As customers shopped, employees darted about speaking into walkie talkies.

"It's been very busy," said support team manager Julian Carrillo, who worked a split shift Friday. He said the last week the former site of Wal-Mart — on Loop 250 — was open, the store had huge crowds of shoppers.

"We expected it to be busy and we don't think it will really let up until after Christmas," Carrillo

said.

Tom Van Vranken, director of the Midland store, said that between 70 and 80 percent of Wal-Mart's employees are full time.

The old store was closed at 10 p.m. Thursday to complete the move to the new store.

According to Van Vranken, the supercenter is the newest prototype developed by Wal-Mart. In addition to the general merchandise offered by the first Wal-Mart, the new store offers a grocery store complete with meat counter, bakery, produce, frozen foods and dairy.

Also contained in the store is a McDonald's — owned by John and Jane Hardell, who also own the McDonald's at Midkiff Road and Loop 250.

The supercenter also boasts a garden center, pharmacy, one-hour photo lab, optometrist and vision center, portrait studio, dry cleaners, hair-care salon, video rental and tire and lube express.

The Wal-Mart was built because of Midland's healthy economy and because Midlanders requested it, according to Van Vranken.

"The customers asked for larger space and wider aisles," he said. "And after they saw the other Wal-Marts, they requested a supercenter."

Mayor Bobby Burns said "Midland should be proud of this supercenter. It seems the face of Midland is changing. We're seeing the retail environment in Midland change."

"The retail and restaurant markets in Midland are going to be different..."

While Burns and employees and shoppers may have looked to the supercenter's opening with anticipation, small locally owned retail-

ers may have viewed it with apprehension.

But Karl Painter, director of the University of Texas of the Permian Basin's Small Business Development Center, said small business owners need not fear Wal-Mart or any other mass marketer coming into the area.

"Overall, I think the supercenter is going to be very beneficial for the community," he said.

He said that many small businesses have coexisted with the supercenter in Odessa.

"It will bring in people from the rural areas to do additional shopping in the Permian Basin and in Midland. It will be a very nice and effective draw for people coming into Midland from rural areas and this can translate into excellent dollars for Midland merchants."

Van Vranken is quick to point out that Wal-Mart has had a \$4.4 billion impact on the Texas economy alone, buying that much in merchandise from 1,800 Texas-based vendors. The Midland store, for example, buys plush toys and beanbags made by Midland-based American Toy Co.

While cautioning that small stores that try to compete head-to-head with Wal-Mart or any other mass marketer will likely lose, Painter said there are techniques that small businesses can use to survive and even thrive, including offering high quality service. Painter said the customer will remember good service and it likely will bring him back.

Another secret is effective advertising, which can draw rural customers to small retailers, Painter said.

"If small businesses are advertising properly and positioning themselves properly, when the ru-

ral customers come in to shop at Wal-Mart, you know they'll also put the other stores on their list.

"People from the rural markets come in for an entire Saturday to do all their shopping, and they'll visit several stores."

Painter concluded that "the Midland-Odessa market definitely has sufficient customers to support both mass marketers and small retailers.

"Odessans saw that when their supercenter opened to throngs of people. Yes, there were some small businesses that didn't sufficiently recognize the challenges and were hurt, but those that altered their techniques and improved their service are thriving in Odessa," he said.

"I see, quite frankly, long-term, how Wal-Mart coming to town can only help Midland because it will attract rural shoppers."

The Midland supercenter was one of 13 opened Friday and is one of 88 in the United States and 28 in Texas. The company plans to have 100 open by the end of the year and an additional 100 open next year.

"We like this Wal-Mart. It's got lots of stuff. Now we are just waiting for Wendy's (scheduled to be located near Wal-Mart) to get built," said one woman who asked not to be identified. "My husband works for a grocery store in Midland, so I better not say I was here," she said, laughing.

One elderly gentleman, pushing a full shopping cart, said, "All they need now is shuttle buses to get you back to your car."

The Small Business Development Center has planned a seminar on Aug. 31 on effective advertising and one on Sept. 27 to teach small businesses how to successfully coexist with the large chains.